DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 518 CS 012 601

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TITLE Implementing Large Scale Change in Literacy Instruction: A Second Look.
PUB DATE 29 Nov 95
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (New Orleans, LA, November 29-December 2, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Research; *Educational Change; Integrated Activities; *Language Arts; Primary Education; *Reading Instruction; Student Needs; *Whole Language Approach; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Authentic Assessment; *Kentucky; Kentucky Education Reform Act 1990; Process Approach (Writing)

ABSTRACT

A study examined whether Kentucky primary teachers were adopting the changes in literacy instruction recommended in the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA/1990) which, in part, encouraged the use of whole language and integrated reading/language arts approaches and the teaching of writing as a process. The study employed direct classroom observations and teacher interviews with 96 subjects, selected by random sample from 24 schools in Kentucky's 8 regional service center areas. Results indicated that approximately 70% of teachers were using recommended practices in reading and writing instruction and 60% were using authentic methods of literacy assessment. Half or more of the teachers were having difficulty implementing continuous progress, using flexible grouping, and varying their instruction to meet individual needs. Teachers were also having difficulty sharing control with students. It appears that statewide mandates in literacy instruction and assessment can bring about changes in teachers' instructional practices. (CR)

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ED 399 518

IMPLEMENTING LARGE SCALE CHANGE IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION: A SECOND LOOK

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A Paper Presented to the
National Reading Conference
New Orleans, LA
November 29, 1995

CS012601

IMPLEMENTING LARGE SCALE CHANGE IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION: A SECOND LOOK

Purpose of the Study

In June, 1990, Kentucky passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), which mandated a complete restructuring of the Kentucky educational system in the areas of finance, governance, and curriculum. One of the mandates which has had far reaching implications has been the requirement for all of Kentucky's elementary schools to implement multi-age, multi-ability primary classrooms by the 1993-1994 school year. As part of the primary program, the Kentucky Department of Education encouraged teachers to adopt developmentally appropriate practices, including "whole language" and "integrated reading/language arts approaches" and to teach "writing as a process."

During the springs of 1993, 1994, and 1995, statewide studies have been conducted to determine the status of implementation of the primary program in Kentucky (Bridge, 1994; 1995). As part of those studies, we have taken an in-depth look at the reading and language arts instruction in Kentucky's primary classrooms.

Methodology

In order to determine whether or not teachers were adopting the recommended changes in literacy instruction, a combination of direct observations in classrooms and teacher interviews were conducted. The teachers in the study included teachers from a geographically stratified random sample of 24 schools chosen from the eight regional service center areas in Kentucky. Within each school, four teachers were randomly selected from the list of primary teachers in that building, resulting in the identification of 96 teachers. Due to scheduling problems, 86 of the 96 teachers were observed in 1994 and 92 in 1995. A different sample of schools and teachers were selected each year.

Trained observers spent one day observing in each classroom and followed the observations with a teacher interview. The observers used a structured observation guide that included various components of the primary program. For the purposes of this study, only the components related to literacy instruction and assessment will be reported. These include aspects of the physical environment, the social environment, teacher/student interaction patterns, and literacy instructional and assessment practices. The percentages of teachers in 1994 and 1995 who were observed to be implementing these aspects of the primary program with high fidelity to recommended practices are presented in Table 1.

Results of the Study

Results revealed that approximately 70% of the teachers are creating a warm social emotional climate, arranging a print rich environment, and using recommended practices in reading and writing instruction; and 60% are using a variety of authentic methods of literacy assessment. Teachers are still having difficulty sharing control with students in that only slightly more than a third of them allow students much opportunity to initiate activities, to evaluate their own work, or to display student work in the classroom. Half or more of the teachers are having difficulty implementing continuous progress, using flexible grouping, and varying their instruction to meet individual needs.

The percentages of teachers judged to be successfully implementing the program dropped in several areas, two of which were statistically significant: the arrangement of a flexible physical environment and the management of continuous progress to meet each student's individual needs. Implementation in several other areas was lower but not significantly so. It appears, however, that the teachers have reached a plateau in their level of implementation and in some cases are reverting back to more traditional practices.

An in-depth follow-up study conducted in the spring of 1995 of eight of the teachers who had been judged as high implementors of the primary program in 1994 revealed that even these teachers reported that they were returning to traditional practices in some areas of reading instruction because they were afraid students were not learning the basic skills (Gooden, 1995).

In the interviews in the statewide study, teachers reported that they had made the greatest changes in their instruction in the areas of reading and writing in response to the education reform mandates. Specifically, they said that they were having the students do a great deal more writing, write more different types of compositions, and do more writing across the curriculum. They also reported that they were relying less on basal reading textbooks and using more children's literature and trade books.

Implications

It appears that statewide mandates in literacy instruction and assessment can bring about changes in teachers' instructional practices. However, if teachers do not have adequate staff development and ongoing support, they may not maintain changes over time, especially if these new practices are not consistent with their beliefs or if they feel that students are not achieving as well as they did in the past.

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Percentage of Teachers Implementing with High Fidelity

	1994	1995
Physical Environment		
Flexible layout	90	78
Print rich environment	70	75
Student work displayed	35	37
Social and Emotional Environment		
Active engagement	63	62
Student talk	73	75
Student/teacher interaction	77	83
Integrated Instruction		
Flexible scheduling	55	52
Broad based themes/units	45	43
Meaning centered reading	74	67
Meaning centered writing	67	63
Varied Instructional Strategies		
Varied instruction	48	47
Student/Teacher initiation	35	29
Flexible grouping	66	52
Continuous progress	55	39
Continuity and frequency	62	60
Authenticity	62	57
Variety of methods	62	60
Student self-evaluation	39	37